

MOUNTAIN LIONS IN MISSOURI?



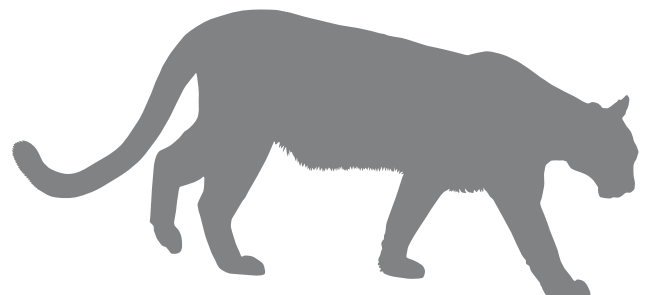
MISSOURI DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION

A FEW FACTS YOU SHOULD KNOW

- Mountain lion, puma, cougar, panther, painter and catamount all refer to the same animal.
- Mountain lions were once common in Missouri, but “black panthers” are not native to the United States. Such black cats do exist, but most commonly as melanistic phases of leopards and jaguars.
- Mountain lions prey principally on deer and other wildlife, occasionally kill livestock and pets, and rarely attack people.
- Approximately 50 people legally keep captive mountain lions in Missouri and an unknown number of people keep them illegally. These animals occasionally escape or are intentionally released when they are no longer wanted. Captive mountain lions are also numerous in neighboring states.
- Escaped or released mountain lions can likely survive for some time on Missouri's abundant deer and furbearer populations.
- MDC has never had a mountain lion restoration program to reduce the deer herd.
- Mountain lions are classified as state endangered in Missouri, and are protected unless they are pursuing or attacking humans, livestock or domestic animals. In those instances they may be killed, but must be reported immediately to a conservation agent and surrendered to him/her within 24 hours.
- The nearest confirmed populations of wild mountain lions are in Texas, Colorado and South Dakota.

The status of mountain lions in Missouri is not clear. Although the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) annually receives dozens of mountain lion sighting reports, only five free-living mountain lions have been verified in Missouri since 1994. They were in Carter, Reynolds, Texas, Christian and Lewis counties. Prior to that, the last confirmed mountain lion was killed in 1927 in southeast Missouri.

We are working diligently to determine their current status in Missouri, and will share significant findings with the public as they become available.



MOUNTAIN LIONS IN

- 🐾 In states that have established mountain lion populations, the cats are seldom seen casually, but do leave evidence in the form of tracks, prey kills, scrapes and scat. Little such evidence has been found in Missouri.
- 🐾 Even small populations of mountain lions, such as the 50 to 80 which live in Florida, produce annual road kills; Missouri, however, has yielded none that we know of.
- 🐾 MDC has not found evidence to verify any wild mountain lion attacks on people, pets or livestock in Missouri.
- 🐾 The risk of a mountain lion attack on people in Missouri is very, very small to almost non-existent.
- 🐾 People, pets and livestock are at much greater risk from automobiles, stray dogs and lightning strikes than they are from mountain lions — especially in Missouri.

DESCRIPTION AND HABITS

The mountain lion (*Puma concolor*) is a large, slender cat with a small head, small rounded ears that are not tufted, powerful shoulders and hindquarters, and a cylindrical tail that is long and heavy. The body fur is short and soft.

The adult is distinguished from the bobcat by its large size (total body length of 60 to 102 inches); uniform coloration of grizzled gray or dark brown to buff or light orange; tail length of 21 to 35 inches (up to half its body length); and 30 teeth. A male mountain lion weighs 140 to 160 pounds, while a female weighs 90 to 110 pounds.

Mountain lions prefer dense cover or rocky, rugged terrain, generally in areas of low human habitation, or regions of dense swamps. The size of the home range is typically 50 to 75 square miles for females and 90 to 120 square miles for males. They are generally nocturnal, but may be active during the day. They readily climb trees.

Female mountain lions may have litters of one to six kittens, which may be born during any month of the year. Kittens are 12 inches long at birth, weigh about one pound, and are blind. They are buff, spotted with black and have rings of brownish-black on the tail. The female carries food to them until they accompany her at about 2 months of age. The kittens lose their spots gradually. They often stay with their mother until they are 2 years old, and may stay together for a while after leaving their mother. Adult females often share territory with their female offspring. Adult males are territorial and may kill other males and kittens they encounter.

Where did the mountain lions that have been verified in Missouri come from?

There is no way to say for certain. Fifty or so people have permits to keep mountain lions legally in Missouri; other people keep them illegally without permits. These captive animals sometimes escape, or are released when they are no longer wanted.

Although the closest established populations are in Texas, Colorado and South Dakota, young, transient male mountain lions sometimes move 300 to 400 miles in search of an area not already occupied by adult males.

They may have been released intentionally by people who thought there should be mountain lions in Missouri.

Can captive mountain lions that are released or have escaped survive in the wild?

Mountain lions' predatory instincts are strong, and, like feral house cats, they probably can survive in the wild in Missouri. Missouri has an abundance of deer and furbearers, which are the main foods of mountain lions. Orphaned, juvenile mountain lions, with no previous hunting experience, are able to kill healthy deer. Declawed, captive mountain lions that have escaped in Florida have survived well in the wild.

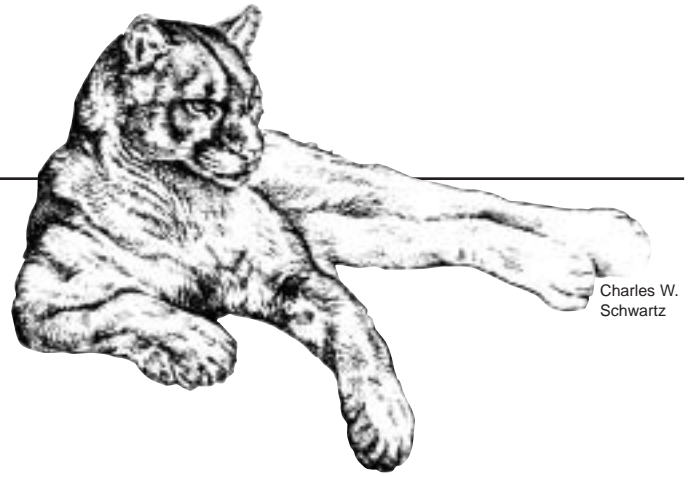
MOUNTAIN LION SIGNS

Tracks

Expert trackers look for the following to identify mountain lions:

- 🐾 Three lobes at the bottom of the pad. Dogs and coyotes have one indent at the bottom of their pads.
- 🐾 Tear-drop shaped toes. Dogs' and bobcats' toes are shaped like an oval.
- 🐾 Between 3- and 3.5-inch-wide tracks. Bobcat tracks will be much smaller—less than 2 inches wide—which is smaller than the print of a 6-month-old mountain lion kitten. You can tell a kitten's track from an adult bobcat's because the mother mountain lion's large track generally will be nearby.
- 🐾 No claw marks are usually visible, except in extremely rare situations when mountain lions use them for extra traction or to suddenly build up speed. Claw marks usually are visible in dog and coyote tracks. Also, dogs and coyotes leave blunt, flat claw marks because their claws are worn down. Mountain lion claws are relatively slender and sharp.

MISSOURI?



Kill Evidence

Mountain lions—They generally kill their prey quickly and efficiently. They creep close, then rush quickly to hit the animal and bite it either in the back of the neck to sever the spinal column, the throat to crush the trachea, or the skull. They do not have long endurance, and do not make long chases.

After the prey is dead, they generally drag the carcass to dense cover to feed. They often open the abdominal cavity, roll out the stomach and intestines and begin feeding on the soft internal organs. On other occasions they begin to feed at the shoulders and ribs. Mountain lions use their claws primarily as hooks to hold onto their prey until they can administer the lethal bite. They seldom leave deep slashes.

After they've eaten their fill, they generally cover the remainder of the carcass with grass, leaves, dirt and other debris. They return to the kill for subsequent feedings as long as it lasts, or until they make another kill. There is generally an abundance of hair from the prey animal by the time they are finished with the carcass. There are exceptions; mountain lions do not always eat what they kill and do not always cover the kill.

Bobcats—Since Missouri has an increasing bobcat population—and bobcats use many of the same techniques as mountain lions for killing, eating and treating their prey—distinguishing the two often depends on finding and measuring tracks and/or punctures made by their canines. A mountain lion's canine teeth are 2 to 2.5 inches apart; dogs are less than 2 inches; coyotes are 1.5 inches; and bobcats are about 1 inch apart.

Dogs—Dogs frequently attack and kill wildlife and livestock. They usually chase their prey and attack wherever they get a hold on the animal, most often the hindquarters. Their attacks usually lead to indiscriminate mutilation and they feed very little on their prey. Dogs generally do not kill the prey quickly or efficiently, but pursue and bite it repeatedly, causing other injuries from collisions with gates, fences and other objects.

Sounds

Mountain lions make little noise in the woods. When they do, they often sound like a person whistling or a bird chirping. When they growl, they sound like an overgrown house cat. Kits have a raspy, loud purr. Many people hear shrieks in the night and think they are made by mountain lions, but often these blood-curdling screams are made by red foxes, injured rabbits, owls or coyotes. Female mountain lions in heat do emit a loud "yowl."

ENCOUNTERS

What to do if you meet a mountain lion

- 🐾 If by remote chance you encounter a mountain lion, remember that mountain lions do not like to fight. Give them a chance to escape, and most likely they will.
- 🐾 Be sure the mountain lion sees you as a threat and not as prey. Keep facing it and do not bend down. Stand as tall as possible and raise your hands or jacket above your head to make yourself look bigger.
- 🐾 Back away; do not turn your back and run. If the mountain lion attacks, fight back with anything at your disposal.

We want to know what you've seen

MDC is interested in receiving recent mountain lion incident/sighting reports.

We have established a Mountain Lion Response Team and given special training to the wildlife damage biologists and other selected staff to prepare them to deal with mountain lion incidents.

MDC conducts field investigations only of those situations which involve human safety, or where there is substantial physical evidence—pet/livestock damage or wildlife kill, scat directly linked to a sighting, or confirmed track(s).

MDC has investigated many mountain lion reports. Some of these investigations have shown the animals in question to be deer, house cats, bobcats, coyotes, red foxes, yellow and black Labrador retrievers and Great Danes. Almost all the tracks have been from bobcats or large dogs.

How to report a sighting

Please report all sightings or physical evidence of a mountain lion to the local conservation agent or nearest Conservation Department office as soon as possible.

Tracks that are characteristic of a mountain lion should be photographed and then covered with a bucket. Photos should be sent to the Conservation Department so that experts can examine them. Also, a permanent mold of the tracks may be made by pouring plaster of Paris into a fresh track.

TRACK COMPARISONS

TRACKS SHOWN AT ACTUAL SIZE

Pamphlet design by Patrick Kipp. Text by Jackie DeSanty. Inside mountain lion silhouette by Patrick Kipp. Front and back cover silhouettes taken from photos by Jim Rathert. Animal tracks by Mark Rathel. ©Missouri Department of Conservation - March 2002



FRONT



HIND



COYOTE



FRONT



HIND



BOBCAT



FRONT



HIND



MOUNTAIN LION



FRONT



HIND



DOMESTIC DOG